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Priest agrees to reduced charge

■ Pleads guilty to trying to endanger child's welfare, sentenced to probation.

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A Roman Catholic priest accused of fondling a 14-year-old boy was allowed to plead guilty Monday to a non-sexual charge.

The Rev. Dennis R. Seward, 55, who was charged with a misdemeanor of third-degree sexual abuse, pleaded guilty to attempted endangering the welfare of a child, also a misdemeanor.

Rochester City Court Judge John E. Elliott sentenced Seward to one year of probation but warned him that he could face 90 days in jail if he violates conditions of his probation.

Seward was charged last year with touching the boy's clothed genitals in 1999 in the rectory of a Rochester church. The charge to which he pleaded guilty al-

leged that he attempted to endanger the child's mental, moral or physical welfare.

By pleading guilty to a non-sexual charge, Seward avoided having to register as a sex offender for 20 years.

Assistant District Attorney Joseph Waldorf said the plea was entered with the permission of the victim after long discussions.

"We didn't take this lightly," Waldorf said. "(The victim) displayed a lot of courage."

Seward's lawyer, John F. Speranza, said he was prepared to call 20 witnesses for Seward's trial, which had been scheduled to begin Wednesday.

But he said he had to abide by Seward's decision to enter a guilty plea.

Seward asked Speranza to ne-



Dennis Seward was accused in 2005 of fondling a 14-year-old boy while pastor of a Rochester church.

gotiate a plea because he was concerned about how a jury would consider the case in light of sexual accusations against priests, Speranza said. Seward also was concerned about the potential impact on the Diocese of Rochester.

"It's really not my call," Speranza said.

Seward was arrested in July 2005 on charges that he molested the boy about 50 times from 1999 to 2001 when Seward was pastor of Church of the Annunciation on Norton Street in northeast Rochester.

The boy claimed that the abuse occurred in a double re-

What's next

The Rev. Dennis Seward, who was on sabbatical when he was arrested last year, remains on sabbatical, a diocese spokesman said. The spokesman said the diocese hadn't reviewed the court proceeding and couldn't comment about the effect of the plea on Seward's future.

clining chair in Seward's living quarters as they watched baseball games on a wide-screen television.

In February, Elliott dismissed a more-serious misdemeanor charge of forcible touching, which could have jailed Seward for up to one year.

The judge found insufficient evidence to support the charge and ruled that the law, which wasn't enacted until late 2001, didn't exist when the act allegedly occurred. □

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